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Pygmoids in the mountains.

Among this medley of small communities, each having contact only with its immediate neighbours, there are nevertheless certain broad distinctions to be drawn.

First among these is the definite racial distinction between the coastal peoples as a whole, including those inhabiting the northern plateau, all of whom share certain physical characteristics in common, and the small, almost pygmoid inhabitants of the mountainous interior of South Malekula who represent the last remnants of an earlier racial stock similar to that found also in the interior of certain other of the larger land-masses in the Western Pacific. Though some of these occasionally come down to the coast at South-West Bay and other spots, practically nothing is known about them.

"Mat-skirt" and "Fringe-skirt."

Among the remaining inhabitants of the island Deacon drew a broad distinction between what he termed the "mat-skirt" people and the "fringe-skirt" people, based on the different types of dress worn by the women.[1] The mat-skirt is a plaited strip made of split pandanus leaves worn round the buttocks with short lengths left unplaited at either end which, when worn, are gathered together in front. It is invariably dyed red, and often decorated with geometric patterns coloured a faint yellow on account of the turmeric bath in which the mats are soaked before applying the red dye, these being bound round a stick during the dyeing process in such a way as to form the desired pattern by preventing the red dye from reaching the parts so bound.[2] The fringe-skirt is, on the other hand, a short petticoat made of shredded banana leaves or numerous pieces of finely twisted string undyed and hanging loosely about the loins. The mat-skirt is worn, with one exception, by the women of all the coastal peoples, and of those inhabiting the northern and southern extremities of the island, among all of whom the men wear a penis-wrapper made of similar material. The fringe-skirt is worn by the women of one coastal district only, namely Mewun, immediately to the north of South-West Bay, and is also the characteristic female dress of those tribes inhabiting the interior of Central Malekula. These two types of dress correspond also with an important cultural distinction, the use of the mat-skirt being definitely correlated with the megalithic culture practised by all the mat-skirt people but not by the fringe-skirted inhabitants of the interior. While it is true that the inhabitants of Mewun already mentioned, whose women wear the fringe-skirt, also perform megalithic rites, these latter have only been adopted by them during recent years. The same also applies to the neighbouring island of Ambrim, where a similar state of

[1] Deacon, 4, pp. 702 ff.
[2] This process is technically known as "reserved dyeing."

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But the couple were surprised by a Lavame man who had stayed at home. Now this man was a *Ghamba Lep*,[1] one of those who through membership of a well-known secret society can turn themselves into birds, and he resolved to make use of this power to warn the husband on his return from Oba. So, as the returning canoe rounded the sandy promontory of La-singo,[2] he transformed himself into two banded rails (*pilagh*), a male and a female, and he made the male rail chase the female along the shore till she yielded and they copulated.

Now the husband saw this from his canoe, and, recognising that it must be the work of a *Ghamba Lep*, determined to find out what had happened. So he went home, and beat his wife till she confessed her transgression, saying that she had lain with the Handillagh man. So the men of Lavame fought those of Handillagh till the decimated survivors of the latter took refuge in the village of Singon, and those who remained of Lavame left Vao and established themselves in a new village of the same name on the mainland. This village has now died out, the only survivors being one man and his two sons, who, having returned to Vao, are now living at Togh-vanu.

Physical Types

The result of this dual origin of the population still shows itself in a variation in physical type remarkable in so small an island. Thus Speiser comments that "it is possible today to distinguish clearly on Vao two types, the Melanesian type from Malekula, dark-skinned, thick-set and frizzly-haired, and the type from Oba, lighter-skinned, more slender and often with almost curly hair." [3] Owing to intermarriage, however, this variation in type is no longer correlated with any existing topographical divisions, but occurs sporadically throughout the whole population, which now forms a single cultural unit closely knit together through ties of kinship.

ORIGINS OF THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION

Turning once more to the evidence regarding the origin and nature of the existing social organisation, four sets of facts present themselves:

(*a*) The mythological data concerning the creation of the inhabitants of Pete-hul through the direct agency of Ta-ghar.
(*b*) Accounts of the subsequent formation of its offshoot village Togh-vanu.
(*c*) The genealogies.
(*d*) The kinship system.

I propose first to examine the mythological data and the genealogies.

[1] See p. 238. [2] Possibly Singon. [3] Speiser, 3, pp. 59-60.